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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000706

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DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, DRL

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04-28-14

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [KOCI](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: UNICEF cites recent positive actions by the Tigers regarding child soldiers but remains cautious

Refs: (A) Colombo 653

- (B) 03 Colombo 2094

(U) Classified by James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: In an April 27 meeting with the DCM, Ted Chaiban, UNICEF Country Representative for Sri Lanka, discussed the LTTE's recent releases of child soldiers. Chaiban cited significant tranches of child combatants released by the LTTE in March and April, driven in part by the factional split in the east. The group's recent actions came in the wake of UNICEF warnings that it would shut down child soldier-related programs in Sri Lanka if there was no improvement in the situation. UNICEF hopes for continued progress in the matter, but the LTTE has much work ahead of it, Chaiban said. In a related development, Human Rights Watch has called on the Tigers to end their child recruitment practices. Through its recent steps, the LTTE appears to have bought some time with UNICEF. UNICEF, however, is clearly monitoring the situation closely. END SUMMARY

2. (C) MEETING WITH UNICEF CHIEF: On April 27, Ted Chaiban, UNICEF Country Representative for Sri Lanka, briefed the DCM and poloff on the recent releases of child soldiers by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). These latest good news stories (see more below) are in contrast to the group's stance late in 2003. Chaiban noted that, in December 2003, he had warned the Tiger leadership (see Ref B) about the possible suspension of UNICEF's rehabilitation programs due to reports of continued LTTE recruitment of children. (UNICEF leads a group of NGOs that operate transition centers to rehabilitate child combatants released by the LTTE.) The organization had decided, however, to delay its final decision on suspending its programs until after the April 2 parliamentary election to avoid making the issue of child soldiers into political fodder. In the days prior to the election, Chaiban said he reissued his warning to LTTE Peace Secretariat chief S. Pulithevan. Despite Pulithevan's claim that the LTTE had "good intentions" on the matter, Chaiban said he told the LTTE official that UNICEF would suspend the program within 45 days if there was no "dramatic action" on the part of the Tigers.

3. (C) RELEASES OF CHILDREN BY LTTE: Before UNICEF made any final decision to cease operations, however, the Tigers made some encouraging moves, including an early March release of 40 children. Chaiban said there was also a release of child soldiers who had been with the LTTE for some time -- something which had previously not occurred. (The LTTE is said to believe that the military value of long-time child soldiers is too great to allow their release, and thus, the group generally only releases the more recent "recruits.") Subsequent releases, clustered around the week of April 11, 2004, specifically stemmed from the Tigers' successful efforts to regain control in the east, following the group's defeat of rebel Tiger commander Karuna's forces (see Ref A). In addition to the deliberate release of 200 or so child combatants in the east, the LTTE also offered to facilitate the release of several hundred child soldiers -- reportedly from Karuna's faction -- who had spontaneously returned to their homes following Karuna's April 9-10 defeat. Chaiban stressed that this offer was something the LTTE "had never done before." Moreover, the LTTE has agreed to give the former child soldiers formal "release letters." Chaiban estimated that total releases of child soldiers stood at approximately 2,500 cases island-wide.

4. (C) Reflecting on the situation, Chaiban was generally upbeat, but noted that the Tigers had a "lot of work to do." (UNICEF has made it clear to the LTTE that if it pursues any "re-recruitment," then it should only focus on individuals over the age of 18.) He noted a recent UNICEF statement critical of the Tigers'

continued recruitment of children. In reply, LTTE political head S.P. Thamilselvan had issued a sharply worded rebuttal -- but had not broken off contact with UNICEF as the Tigers had done in the past. Chaiban further said he would travel in the near-term to the east to assess the situation, and that he also planned to meet with Thamilselvan "quite soon." Chaiban stated that if the positive trend continued, UNICEF would consider opening two more "transit centers" in the east. (The opening of these centers was planned previously, but put on hold when the LTTE continued its recruitment of children.)

15. (U) HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH STATEMENT: In a related development, the U.S.-based NGO, Human Rights Watch issued a sharply worded statement on April 27 calling on the LTTE to cease efforts to "recruit recently released child soldiers." Citing numbers slightly different from UNICEF's figures, Human Rights Watch counted 209 children that had been recently released to their families, along with an additional 800 child soldiers who voluntarily returned home with the fall of Karuna's faction. The statement further called on UNICEF, UN agencies, and the GSL and others to take all necessary steps to provide resources for these former child soldiers and to protect them from re-recruitment.

16. (C) COMMENT: Through its recent steps, the LTTE appears to have bought some time with UNICEF. Chaiban made clear, however, that UNICEF is monitoring the situation closely and wants to see more progress. Although the Tigers have made the right moves of late, their long-term pattern of behavior is not encouraging. The group, for example, has made plenty of promises before and then reverted to all-out child recruitment drives when it decided it needed to do so. One concern about many of the recent releases is the notion that the LTTE allowed them to go free as a tactic, i.e., the LTTE saw the releases as a way of undercutting Karuna's military force and as a way to curry favor with Tamils in the east. If that is the case, progress in this area could be short-lived now that Karuna's splinter group appears largely vanquished and the LTTE "central command" is close to re-establishing firm control over Tamil areas in the east. Our view is that UNICEF is navigating these tricky shoals quite adeptly. END COMMENT.

17. (U) Minimize considered.

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